



Swami Vivekananda's vision

While travelling through the length and breadth of India, Swami Vivekananda once reached Punjab, where he had a strange vision. He saw an old man standing on the banks of the Indus, and chanting Vedic hymns, using intonations that were distinctly different from those used in modern times. The passage that he heard was:

Āvahi varadé devi tyaksharé brahmavādinī

Gāytri chandasām mātā brahmayoni namo'stu té

--"O come! Thou Effulgent One, Thou Bestower of Blessings, Signifier of Brahman in three letters! Salutation be to Thee, O Gayatri, Mother of Vedic Mantras, Thou who hast sprung from Brahman!"

Talking about that vision, Swamiji was to say later, 'I saw an old man seated on the bank of the great river. Wave upon wave of darkness was rolling in upon him, and he was chanting from the *Rig Veda*. Then I awoke and went on chanting. They were the tones that we used long ago... Shankarâchârya had caught the rhythm of the Vedas, the national cadence. Indeed I always imagine that he had some vision such as mine when he was young, and recovered the ancient music that way. Anyway, his whole life's work is nothing but that, the throbbing of the beauty of the Vedas and Upanishads.' (from *Complete Works, Vol. IX*).

This vision explains the origin, nature, form, and utility of the Vedas. The Vedic hymns are the prayers to various divinities; they were realised by the *rishis* (sages) in the depths of their transcendental state; they are supposed to be handed down in a *guru-shishya paramparā* (teacher to student tradition); they are the rhythm of the national life of India; and spiritual eminence can come to a person only when he catches the rhythm signified by the Vedas.

What are the Vedas

The Vedas are the achievement, glory, power, strength and sustenance of the Hindu race.

Although most Hindus never see Vedic texts in their lifetime, yet, anyone who claims to be a Hindu, has to bow down in reverence to the Vedas, and has to accept their supreme authority in matters individual, social, philosophical, religious, and spiritual. There is nothing in Hinduism that does not owe its origin and allegiance directly or indirectly to the Vedas.

The Vedas are full of all kinds of knowledge, and is the perfect guide for man in his quest for the four *purusartha* (goal of life)– *Dharma* (religious practices), *Artha* (material welfare), *Kama* (pleasure and happiness) and *Moksha* (Salvation). In sacred Hindu literature, the Vedas are considered the very manifestation of God, and the ultimate source of all wisdom and of all Dharma. It is for this reason that every Hindu's conduct, social carriage, religious ambition, and spiritual attainments have been shaped by the Vedas. These sacred texts are the foundation of the Hindu way of life, and also the technical support for its evolution.

There can be no doubt that without these great texts the Hindus would have continued to be savages, and in the long run they would have been annihilated by the marauding looters and the proselytising zealots. When the warrior caste of the Hindu race failed to save the country from the invaders, it was the Vedas that saved the race from internal dissipation; when the bulldozers of science started pulverising every religion into meek submission, it was the Vedas that made the Hindus stand in all majesty and with dignity -- unconquered, unscathed; and today, when materialism and its never satiating ally, consumerism, is sucking the globe of its vitality, it is the Vedas that make the Hindus laugh at the greedy and vain monster in derision.

No words can do justice to the Vedas' contribution to the world civilisation in general, and to the Hindus in particular.

The word *veda* is derived from the root *vid*, which has five different meanings (*jnaane, labhe, vichaarane* etc.), but of which "to know" is more popular. When used as common noun, the term may be used to mean the study of a particular science e.g., *dhanurveda, ayurveda* etc. As an adjective, it may be used to glorify a book, or a subject, e.g. *Srimad Bhagavatam*, which is respectfully called "the fifth Veda" by the *Bhagavata* devotees.

In its more popular sense, Vedas (with an 's') is used as proper noun to refer to the *Samhitas* (Vedic mantras) associated with the four Vedas (*Rig Veda, Yajur Veda, Sama Veda* and *Atharva Veda*). In a general sense, Vedas also means the *Brahmanas, Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* attached to these *Samhitas*. As a noun, the word first appears in the *Rig Veda*, where it means ritual lore.

The *Vedas* have other names like: *Nigama, Shruti, Āmnāya*, and *trayee* to express variously the outlook of various schools of thoughts. For example, Mimamsakas, the traditional Vedic schools, define *Shruit* as: *Shrutyate dharma anayā iti* (The injunctions of Dharma that are heard from the guru), and *Āmnāya* as: *Āmnāyate upadishyate anen iti* (That which gives instructions). *Nigama* is defined as the traditional wisdom transmitted from generation to generation, and *Veda* has been described by Shankaracharya as: *Parmātmānām labhante iti* (That through which one attains God).

Mimamsakas, the traditionalists, limit the scope of the Vedas to instructions and injunctions concerning ritualistic sacrifices, and lay emphasis on the first two portions of the Vedas, *The Mantra*, and *The Brahmana*: "*Mantrabrāhmanyoh vednam dheyam*". According to them, the *Upanishads* and other texts that talk about Atman, or any such topic, are intended to encourage people towards Vedic sacrifices. As opposed to this view, Shankaracharya believes that the goal of all Vedic texts is to lead a person towards self realisation. According to him, Vedic sacrifices are meant for people who are not yet ready to give up selfish action, and who must wend their way up by first purifying their mind through action.

The Origin and Antiquity of the Vedas: Shruti

The Dating: Who wrote the Vedas? This is an oft-repeated question by the scholars, and the critics of the Vedas. Naturally. When most writers use the 'copy and paste' technique to see their name in print, it is natural for the world to wonder how someone could create such a great thing and not leave their name behind! Since our childhood, we have grown to see the name of the creator associated with the creation. But in India, the concept of the Creator is impersonal, and hence it has been the tendency of the great creators of art, poetry and music to remain anonymous. According to them, the personal degrades, whereas the impersonal elevates.

The Vedas, and their recorders are as impersonal as God Himself.

No single person, or a group of persons wrote the *Vedas*. As mentioned, the ancient *rishis* (sages) in the depths of their meditation and also in their transcendental state of mind came face to face with truths which they recorded as *The Vedas*. These truths were passed from the father to the son, or from the teacher to the disciple orally. Mostly these truths stayed with the families whose ancestors had discovered them. With time, more and more revelations were added to the existing mass, which made it difficult to manage the work through oral tradition. After some time, addition to the existing mass of knowledge was stopped, and every new finding was recorded in some other kind of work.

All this information comes to us from the tradition and writings of the ancient times. Indian scholars neither know, nor care to know the dates related to the Vedas: when they were composed, which section was composed earlier, when their writing began, etc. The system of such dating began from the times of Max Muller, and continues with the Western scholars. Unfortunately, even for them it is a daunting task. Max Muller fixed the date of the first composition at 1500 BCE, which has now been greatly questioned. Interestingly, there has been a discovery in Asia Minor

of the names of the Vedic deities Mitra, Varuna, and Indra, in an inscription of about 1400 BCE.

According to some Indian Vedic scholars like Tilak, who based their calculations on astronomical data, the Vedas were composed at least 8000 years ago. Swami Vivekananda agrees with Tilak, and says, "It was written, nobody knows at what date, it may be 8,000 years ago, in spite of all modern scholars may say, it may be 9,000 years ago."

One serious problem in fixing the date of the Vedas is the ludicrous Aryan invasion theory, according to which Aryans came to India around 2000 BCE, and destroyed the existing civilisation to settle down there. However, this theory and the dates related to it have been refuted by the modern scholars. Swami Vivekananda also debunked this theory strongly, and wrote:

'Whenever the Europeans find an opportunity, they exterminate the aborigines and settle down in ease and comfort on their lands; and therefore they think the Aryans must have done the same! The Westerners would be considered wretched vagabonds if they lived in their native homes depending wholly on their own internal resources, and so they have to run wildly about the world seeking how they can feed upon the fat of the land of others by spoliation and slaughter; and therefore they conclude the Aryans must have done the same! But where is your proof? Guess-work? Then keep your fanciful guesses to yourselves! In what Veda, in what Sukta, do you find that the Aryans came into India from a foreign country? Where do you get the idea that they slaughtered the wild aborigines? What do you gain by talking such nonsense? '

Another interesting reason for this problem of dating is the prejudices in the minds of the European scholars, who were all Christians. According to Christianity, the earth, the sun, the stars and everything was created in 4032 BCE (according to the Bible, and the year calculated by the great scientist Newton himself!). Naturally it was impossible for them to believe in a culture which went beyond the official date of the Lord's act.

For our studies, fixing the date of the Vedas is no issue at all. Suffice it to say that the Vedas were revealed to the sages, who passed on the wisdom to

their disciples orally. Writing appeared in India around the 5th century BC in the form of the Brahmi script, but texts of the length of the *Rig Veda* were not written down until much later. Very few manuscripts (a maximum of 80) are available of this work, since most families carried the whole thing in their head. The oldest surviving manuscript dates to the 11th century.

The sages took extraordinary precautions to preserve from loss or corruption the sacred text, which was being passed orally. The first step towards this was the formation of the *Pada* or 'word' text. In the *Pada*, all the words of the *Samhita* text are separated and given in their original form, before being shaped by the rules of *Sandhi* (conjunction). There are other rules too. The two methods of memorisation came to be known as: *Samhitāpātha*, which has all Sanskrit rules of sandhi applied and is the text used for recitation; and the *Padapātha* has each word isolated and is used for memorisation.

Padapātha was followed by other and more complicated methods of reciting the text, and by various works called *Anukramanis* or 'Indexes', which enumerate from the beginning to the end of the *Rig Veda* the number of stanzas contained in each hymn, the deities, and the metres of all the stanzas of the *Rig Veda*. It is due to these various precautions that the text of the Vedas have been handed down for thousands of years with a fidelity that finds no parallel in any other literature.

Since these were learnt by listening, these were called *Shruti* (heard). Other than the Vedas, every other literature which had spiritual connotation was termed *Smriti*. Throughout the history of India, *Shrutis* occupied the highest position in matters of respect and authority. In matters of chance conflict between the statements of the two, the words of the *Shrutis* were accepted as correct.

What is amazing about these works is that they were passed on from generation to generation for 8000 years or so, and were preserved in families all over India. When in the nineteenth century, Max Muller compiled the whole work for its first printing, the world was amazed to see that there was not a single alphabet's discrepancy between the manuscripts of any two families, though they lived separated by thousands of miles and

had maintained them orally! This meant that even the most ancient manuscripts were no more authentic than what the Brahmins of the period were reciting from memory.

The world still wonders at the prodigious memory of the Brahmins who preserved a whole library of books in their head, generation after generation for thousands of years! This was the reason why the burning of libraries and the destruction of books in India by the invaders could not destroy the Vedas, and Hinduism was saved from annihilation.

Life and times in the Vedas

Aruni

Indian society during the Vedic age was qualitatively different from what we see today. Those were the days when sacrificial fires would send their smoke to the high heavens carrying with them the essence of offerings to the gods. In turn the gods would come down from the heavens to parley with the human beings. The lush green forests would provide the necessities to the great sages who could freely breathe spirituality there.

In those days it was customary for the eligible and competent children to go to some great master and stay with him to study the scriptures. The responsibility of feeding and clothing the students was with the teacher, who usually was quite poor. So the students had to do a lot of work, which included collecting alms, looking after the cows, working in the fields, performing household chores and collecting material from the forest. In addition, they had to be obedient and humble.

Āyodha Dhaumya was a great teacher of his time who was also credited with mystical experiences and supernatural powers. Despite all his greatness as a teacher, he was at times hard on his favourite disciples. Aruni was one such disciple.

Dhaumya had some land in which he had planted paddy saplings. These saplings required a lot of water to grow up, and so mud boundaries, known as bunds, had to be erected around the cultivated land during the rains. During one of the heavy showers, the teacher sent Aruni to check if the bunds were alright.

On reaching there he noticed a breach in a bund which he tried to fill, but failed. So he lay down there to stop the water from flowing out of the field. He stayed in that position for the whole night, till his absence was noted the next morning. The teacher hurried with his pupils to the field and not finding him anywhere, started calling out his name loudly.

Finally there was a faint reply from the ground where the devoted disciple lay semi-conscious. Aruni got up from the bund, as if tearing the land asunder. The young boy then told all that had happened. This overwhelmed Dhaumya, and spontaneous words of blessings for Aruni poured out of his mouth, " Since you tore the ground to get up, you will henceforth be known as Uddalaka (Sanskrit term for one who performs such an act). And, since you have obeyed my instructions literally, you will become blessed in every sense. Also, all the scriptures and the Vedas will reveal themselves to you of their own."

Thus blessed by his teacher, Aruni became a realised soul that very moment and went back to Panchala, his home. In due course he became very famous and started his own hermitage. It is said that during a particular sacrifice he wished the famous river Saraswati to be present there, and the river appeared. Since then the river became known as Manorama, since it was born of the *manas*, the mind of the sage. He also became one of the more prominent priests at the court of Indra, the king of gods.

Upamanyu

Āyodha Dhaumya had another disciple, Upamanyu, who was fully obedient towards his guru. When he was admitted to the hermitage, he was a healthy and well fed young boy.

One day when the boy returned from the forest with the cows, his teacher asked, 'Upamanyu, my child, upon what do you support yourself? You look so exceedingly plump.'

Upamanyu, 'Sir, I support myself by begging.'

Dhaumya, 'What is obtained in alms should not be taken by you without offering it to me.'

The next day Upamanyu did as he had been told, and he offered to his teacher what he had received as *bhiksha*. But, the teacher took the whole of it, without leaving anything for the young boy.

After some days the teacher noted that the boy still looked as healthy as ever. When questioned, Upamanyu answered that he went a second time round the village asking for alms. The teacher reprimanded him for imposing so much upon the poor villagers. So the young boy had to miss out on his meals.

Once when the boy was returning from the forest with his cows, the teacher noted that he still looked as fat as he did before. When asked to explain, Upamanyu replied, 'Sir, I now live upon the milk of these cows.'

This annoyed Dhaumya. 'It is not proper for you to appropriate the milk of my cows without having first obtained my permission.' So the boy stopped taking that too. He then started living on the froth that the calves threw out while sucking milk from their mother, but Dhaumya also objected to that.

Hungry and helpless, the young boy ate the leaves of the *Arka* plants, which are wild and poisonous. This made him go blind, and groping around on the forest floor, he fell into a pit.

In the evening that day Dhaumya noted the absence of Upamanyu and thought that the boy was probably piqued at the instructions of his teacher. To make up for his cruelty, the teacher immediately set off for the forest with some of his disciples. But the young boy was nowhere to be seen. The search party then started shouting Upamanyu's name in the hopes of getting a reply. Finally they discovered him in the pit in which he had fallen.

When the teacher came to know all that had happened, he told Upamanyu: 'Glorify the twin Aswins, the physicians of the gods, and they will restore you your sight.' Thus directed by his teacher, Upamanyu recited the mantras of the *Rg Veda* which glorify the Aswins:

'Ye have existed before the creation! Ye first-born beings, ye are displayed in this wondrous universe of five elements! I desire to obtain you by the help of the knowledge derived from hearing, and of meditation, for ye are Infinite!

"Ye Aswins, I adore you! I also adore the Sky which is your handiwork! Ye are the ordainers of the fruits of all acts from which even the gods are not

free! Ye are yourselves free from the fruits of your acts!"

The prayer that was uttered by Upamanyu had poetic beauty, anguish of a helpless soul, and the power of the Vedic mantras. The grace of his teacher was with the young boy, and he chanted the mantras in the perfect way. The result was instantaneous -- the twin Aswins appeared before the distressed boy and said, 'We are satisfied. Here is a cake for you. Take and eat it. You will be cured of your blindness.' But, Upamanyu refused to take it without offering it to his teacher, as he had been ordered earlier. The gods were so impressed that they blessed him further.

When he returned to the ashrama with the cake, his teacher blessed him, 'You will obtain prosperity even as the Aswins have said. In addition, the Vedas and all the *Dharma shastras* will shine in you.'

It was thus that a great sage was born entirely by the virtue of obedience. The Vedic prayers composed by Upamanyu are still sung by the Vedic Brahmins.

Characteristics of the Vedas

Veda is knowledge in entirety: There can be no end to knowledge since it is as infinite as God Himself, and is one with Him. This has been pointed out beautifully in the Bible, 'In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God' (John 1:1). Such being the nature of knowledge, it is ever present, and everywhere; since God is also ever present and is present everywhere. Depending on the state of one's mind, one can reach the various levels of the Eternal Knowledge, which we call art, science, philosophy, poetry, spiritual truths etc. However, the major portion of the sum total of knowledge has to remain unexplored because of the limitations of the mind.

Veda is the sum total of all knowledge: discovered and undiscovered, and *The Vedas* (the books) are the records of the truths discovered by the human mind. Thus in a general sense, Vedas are the orthodox religious and philosophical wisdom of India, and in its particular sense, these are the books in which the earliest wisdom is preserved. In this writing, the term Veda has been used to mean Knowledge, and the *Vedas*, to mean the entire *Samhita*, *Brahman*, *Aranyaka*, and the *Upanishads*.

The Vedas are eternal: For the Hindus, the *Vedas* are eternal, without beginning and without human authorship. They have also been described as the inner life of man, and hence eternal. Making it more clear, Patanjali, the author of *Yoga Sutras*, says that the words of the Vedas are not eternal, but it is the knowledge (ideas) conveyed through them that is. In Sanskrit, the eternal Knowledge is also known as *Sphota*, and so the Vedas are also known as *Shabda Brahman*, i.e., God as word. It is because of this that the work is treated with the greatest reverence by the Hindus. In many Indian temples, they are even worshipped as a deity.

The *Vedas* command so much respect that every Hindu philosopher has to show that whatever they have to say, is in consonance with the Vedas. This is known as *Shruti Praman*. The systems of philosophy that refuses to

accept the Vedas as the ultimate authority, are called *nastika darshana* (lit. atheistic philosophy).

Vedas are the oldest literature of the world: The oldest trace of literary sources from the ancient Greek world is the works of Homer (c. 700 BCE). From the Middle East, the oldest books are the Hebrew Bible. Parts of the Old Testament are much older, but they took shape only around 500 BCE. The Gathas of Zoroaster are also old (525 BCE), but they appeared later than the *Vedas*. The oldest book from the Chinese tradition is the I Ching whose core portions are believed to be of 1000 BCE or so.

Thus *Samhitas* (according to Max Muller, 1500 BCE), the collections of Vedic hymns, are the oldest literature of the world. It has been conclusively proved that no book, or literature as we understand the terms, was written anywhere near the period that these *Samhitas* were recorded. They are the earliest records of the aspirations of human minds, the questions that arose, and the possible answers that they comprehended to those great riddles.

Vedas are vast: It is believed that the total content of the *Vedas* was so vast that the *Samhitas* (texts) alone were enough to fill up a room. Patanjali mentions that the Sama Veda had one thousand branches, but they are all lost, and we are left with only three branches. Similar loss has occurred with each of the *Vedas*; the major portion of them has disappeared, and we have been left with only minor portion. As we shall see, the various portions were under the care of particular families; each branch put into the head of certain priests and kept alive by memory and when these families died out, or were killed under foreign persecution, or somehow became extinct; these portions were lost forever.

The whole corpus of Vedic mantras (only the Samhita) have around 20,400 hymns which run in around 90,000 padas (lines). This does not include the *mantra*, *aranyak*, and *the upanishad* portions of the Vedas. Compared to this, *The Mahabharata*, considered to be the largest work, has 1,00,000 shlokas (mostly of 2 lines each).

The Two approaches: The approach to the study of the Vedas is twofold: the Western, and the traditional Indian. F. Max Muller, the great Indologist, initiated a deep interest in the Western minds towards the Vedas. His

contribution in the various fields of study of the Vedas has been simply immense, but his approach is constrained. Even Swami Vivekananda, who had met Max Muller, and admired him a lot, was not willing to accept everything that he had said about the *Vedas*, their date, or their interpretation.

The traditional Indian approach, on the other hand, has a rich heritage, and has an unbroken tradition of thousands of years which continues even now. Swami Vivekananda, despite his modern outlook, always held the orthodox Indian view when it came to the Vedas.

In this article, the approach is traditional. Whenever needed, help has been taken from the Western sources, but in case of any conflicting view, the traditional approach has been retained.

Shabda Brahman: The Fountainhead of Creation

Hindus believe that the Vedas are *apaurusheya*, i.e., 'not created by any person'; sage or scholar. It is their belief that God Himself breathed out the Vedas before the creation of the universe. In turn, when Brahma began to create, He made use of Veda and started the new cycle of creation in the same order and style as it existed in the previous cycle.

The process of creation and its relation to the Vedas has been beautifully explained by Swami Vivekananda in his various speeches, dialogues and writings. Here is mentioned his exposition in brief.

'A word is Veda, if I can pronounce it rightly. Then it will immediately produce the [desired] effect. This mass of Vedas eternally exists and all the world is the manifestation of this mass of words. Then when the cycle ends, all this manifestation of energy becomes finer and finer, becomes only words, then thought. In the next cycle, first the thought changes into words and then out of those words [the whole universe] is produced. If there is something here that is not in the Vedas, that is your delusion. It does not exist.

'Veda means the sum total of eternal truths; the Vedic Rishis experienced those truths; they can be experienced only by seers of the supersensuous and not by common men like us. That is why in the Vedas the term Rishi means "the seer of the truth of the Mantras"....Veda is of the nature of Shabda or of idea. It is but the sum total of ideas. Shabda, according to the old Vedic meaning of the term, is the subtle idea, which reveals itself by taking the gross form later on. So owing to the dissolution of the creation the subtle seeds of the future creation become involved in the Veda. Accordingly, in the Puranas you find that during the first Divine Incarnation, the Minavatara, the Veda is first made manifest. The Vedas having been first revealed in this Incarnation, the other creative manifestations followed. Or in other words, all the created objects began to

take concrete shape out of the Shabdās or ideas in the Veda. For in Shabda or idea, all gross objects have their subtle forms. Creation had proceeded in the same way in all previous cycles or Kalpas. This you find in the Sandhya Mantra of the Vedas: " The Creator projected the sun, the moon, the earth, the atmosphere, the heaven, and the upper spheres in the same manner and process as in previous cycles."

'...Supposing this jug breaks into pieces; does the idea of a jug become null and void? No. Because, the jug is the gross effect, while the idea, "jug", is the subtle state of the Shabda-state of the jug. In the same way, the Shabda-state of every object is its subtle state, and the things we see, hear, touch, or perceive in any manner are the gross manifestations of entities in the subtle or Shabda state. Just as we may speak of the effect and its cause. Even when the whole creation is annihilated, the Shabda, as the consciousness of the universe or the subtle reality of all concrete things, exists in Brahman as the cause. At the point of creative manifestation, this sum total of causal entities vibrates into activity, as it were, and as being the sonant, material substance of it all, the eternal, primal sound of "Om" continues to come out of itself. And then from the causal totality comes out first the subtle image or Shabda-form of each particular thing and then its gross manifestation. Now that causal Shabda, or word-consciousness, is Brahman, and it is the Veda.

'... even if all the jugs in the universe were to be destroyed, the idea or Shabda, "jug", would still exist. So if the universe be destroyed--I mean if all the things making up the universe be smashed to atoms--why should not the ideas or Shabdās, representing all of them in consciousness, be still existing? And why cannot a second creation be supposed to come out of them in time?

'... nothing is produced if you or I cry out like that; but a jug must be revealed if the idea of it rises in Brahman which is perfect in Its creative determinations. When we see even those established in the practice of religion (Sadhakas) bring about by will-power things otherwise impossible to happen, what to speak of Brahman with perfect creativeness of will? At the point of creation Brahman becomes manifest as Shabda (Idea), and then assumes the form of "Nada" or "Om". At the next stage, the particular

Shabdas or ideas, that variously existed in former cycles, such as Bhuh, Bhuvah, Svah, cow, man, etc., begin to come out of the "Om". As soon as these ideas appear in Brahman endowed with perfect will, the corresponding concrete things also appear, and gradually the diversified universe becomes manifest."

To highlight this power of the Vedic mantras to create anything, Valmiki in *Ramayana* (chapter 91), describes how Bharadwaja created quality food, dancing girls and other objects of enjoyment for the army of king Bharata when he was on his way to meet Sri Rama in exile.

The concept that ideas, words and the corresponding objects are related, is one of the essential pillars of Hinduism. This concept was later taken up by the Vaishnavas who proclaimed that the name and the named object are same. Sri Ramakrishna used to quite often mention this fact of God and His name being the same.

Creation according to two hymns of the Vedas

Purusha Suktam (RV X.90) and *Nasadiya Suktam* (RV X.129) describe the process of creation in two different ways. *Purusha Suktam* describes creation as having come out from, and by Purusha (God).

"The universes, past, present and future, are but manifestations of the Supreme Lord who expands Himself as the Purusa. He is the Lord of immortality but has manifest Himself as the Purusa in the universe so that the *jivas* may enjoy material fruits. '.

"The past, present and future universes are manifestations of the Lord's powers, but the Lord Himself is much greater. The material creation is but one quarter portion, and the eternal nature in the spiritual sky exists in three quarters portion.

"The three quarters portion of the Lord transcended the material portion. The Lord in the one quarter portion manifested the universe again, as He had done repeatedly before. The Lord of the one quarter portion began the work of creation, by going all around, taking the form of all animate and inanimate objects." (RV X.90.2-4)

This concept was taken up by the later philosophers to describe how God creates the universe.

Nasadiya Suktam begins with the concept of "pure existence" described as "in the beginning there was neither nothingness (i.e. creation did not come out of vacuum), nor was there any existence (i.e. there was nothing that could be known through senses or the mind)". The first step of creation was when "desire descended on it. That was the primal seed, born of the mind."

It was from this point that the subtle became gross, and then acted on itself. Thus *Prana* (the cosmic energy) hammered at *Akasha* (the finest first

particles) to produce gross matter which ultimately to become the universe.

Swami Vivekananda loved this idea of creation so much that he translated the hymn into Sanskrit, and used its various concepts and imagery freely in his talks. One of the listeners of his talks was Mr Nicholas Tesla, who was a highly respected scientist and an electrical engineer of his time. Swamiji wrote about him, 'Mr. Tesla was charmed to hear about the Vedantic Prana and Akasha and the Kalpas, which according to him are the only theories modern science can entertain. Now both Akasha and Prana again are produced from the cosmic Mahat, the Universal Mind, the Brahma or Ishvara.'

Interestingly, *Nasadiya Suktam* throws up its hands in despair at the perplexity of creation and concludes with:

But, after all, who knows, and who can say

Whence it all came, and how creation happened?

The gods themselves are later than creation,

So who knows truly whence it has arisen?

This inexplicability of creation through inferential knowledge, is fundamental in Hinduism.

The theory of creation in *Nasadiya Sukta* is more impersonal, according to which the creative power existed without vibration (*Ānidavātam*) after the dissolution of the previous cycle (*kalpa*). In that state, there is a kind of equilibrium, which is characterised by absence of any kind of motion. When the process of creation is about to begin, there appears mysteriously the power that disturbs this equilibrium, and the creative process begins.

The later philosophers and poets took up both these concepts to develop and consolidate their system of thought, the most famous of which are Samkhya, and the Bhagavata dhrama (detailed in the Puranas). The whole

of Indian philosophy (excepting those who do not believe in any creation at all), accepts one of these two models and modifies them to suit its needs.

Division of the Vedas

The tradition says that with the growing mass of Vedic literature, and the associated problem of keeping the whole thing in memory, it had become imperative to find ways and means of preserving the pure, and leaving out the unimportant. So, Vyasa (c. 1500 B.C.E), the great authority that he was of his time, divided the Vedas into four and gave the responsibility of preserving them to four of his great disciples.

He compiled the *Rig Veda* by collecting the *rik mantras*, which are a kind of chant set to fixed melodies which are used as prayers during *yajnas* (sacrifices). This was taught to Paila

The *Sāma Veda* is a collection of *Sāma* songs (a particular metre, which can be sung) from *Rig Veda*. The arrangement of its verses is with reference to their place and use in the Soma sacrifice. This Veda was handed over to Jaimini.

The *Yajur Veda* is composed of *yajus* (prose mantras), which are used in sacrifices. Most of its verses are taken from the *Rig Veda*, but it also contains some original prose *mantras* which could be used as sacrificial prayers. However, even the *Riks* in Yajurveda are recited as if they were prose passages. This Veda was taught to Vaishampayana.

Later on, there was a quarrel between Vaishampayana and his prodigious disciple Yajnavalkya. Following the quarrel, Yajnavalkya left his guru and performed the *tapasya* of the Sun God, who taught him the Veda afresh. This version of *Yajurveda* is called *Shukla Yajur Veda*, or *Vājasaneyi Samhitā* (from *Vāj*, which means energy, or strength).

The *Atharva Veda* consists of a special class of Vedic texts known as *chhanda*, which are comprised of *Riks* (5/6) and *Yajus* (1/6). These mantras deal mostly with magic, spells, incantations, kingly duties, and also spiritual truths. Sumanta was taught this work.

There are lots of repetition of the mantras in these Vedas. For example, 140 Rig Veda mantras are repeated in the Rig Veda itself, 1800 Rig Veda mantras are repeated in Samaveda, 230 Atharva Veda mantras have been repeated in the Atharva Veda, 1 Yajurveda mantra has been repeated in Samaveda, and so on.

The division of the Vedas and the arrangement of the hymns followed precise rules and was fully scientific. To take one small example, in mandala II to VII of the *Rig Veda Samhita*, the arrangements of the hymns is by gods, with Agni at the head, followed by Indra; and in Mandala IX the arrangement is by metres. Within any series, the arrangement of the hymns is in descending order of the number of verses. Thus various rules were applied to make the arrangements systematic.

The four basic Vedas gradually branched off into many recension, or *śākhās* which were maintained by various teachers. Slowly these recension came to be known by the name of these teachers. Thus the *Satapatha Brahmana* of the *Shukla Yajur Veda* survives in Kānva and Mādhyandina recension, according to the two disciples of Yajnavalkya. These versions differ greatly in content, the number of verses, and the arrangement of the sections and chapters; the former has seventeen, whereas the latter has fourteen sections. Interestingly, the concluding portion of both recension is the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*; but that too differs in the two *shakhas*. Shankaracharya's commentary on this Upanishad is based on the Kānva recension.

Trayee: The three Vedas: The term *trayī*, or triad, often used to denote the Vedas, is collectively applied to *Rig*, *Sam*, and *Yajur*. The *Atharva* is excluded from the triad because it has no application to sacrificial actions. This has made many Western scholars conclude wrongly that *Atharva Veda* is a later composition. What they miss is the fact that one of the four priests officiating in all Vedic sacrifices had to be from *Atharva Veda* tradition.

Categories of Vedic texts

Vedic texts are traditionally categorised into four classes: the Samhitās (Mantra), Brahmanas, Aranyakas, and Upanishads. Certain Sutra literature like *Shrautasutras* and the *Grhyasutras* are also classified as "Vedic".

A collection of Mantras is called a *Samhita*. At times, it is often the Samhita portion alone which is referred to as the Veda. For instance, the word 'Rigveda' may mean the *Rigveda Samhita*.

The *Brāhmanas* are prose texts that discuss the sacrificial rituals as well as comment on their meaning and some other connected themes. Each of the Brahmanas is associated with one of the Samhitas or its recension. The Brahmanas may either form separate texts or can be partly integrated into the text of the Samhitas. They may also include the Aranyakas and Upanishads.

The *Āranyakas*, or "forest texts", are the concluding part of the Brahmanas that contain discussions on *upasana*, the meditation on sacrificial symbols. However, there is often no clear-cut distinction between the Brahmanas proper and the Aranyakas, or between the Aranyakas and the Upanishads. The Brahmana text proper often merges into the Aranyakas and many old Upanishads are actually embedded in the Aranyakas.

The *Upanishads* are the philosophical works of the Vedas. They discuss the nature of the soul and the world, and conclude that "Atman is Brahman". These works are now known as Vedanta ("the end of the Vedas") and are the basis of all the Vedantic schools of thought which developed in later times. For thousands of years now, the Upanishads have been the backbone of the Hindu religion.

Although the four sections (Samhita, Brahmanas, Aranyakas, Upanishads) of the Vedas follow each other in succession, there are exceptions to this. For example, in Rigveda, Samaveda, Shukla Yajurveda and the Atharvaveda, there is a clear-cut separation of the Mantra collection from

the Brahmana portions, but in Krishna Yajurveda, the Mantra and the Brahmana portions are intermixed. Thus, the Taittiriya 'Samhita', belonging to the Krishna Yajurveda, has Mantras interspersed with Brahmana portions. Again, Taittiriya 'Brahmana' has both Mantras and Brahmana passages mixed with each other. Similarly, *Isa Upanishad* comes at the end of the *Samhita* itself instead of the Aranyaka. Some Upanishads come at the end of the Brahmana and some others are not distinctly separate from their respective Aranyaka. The list goes on.

Nevertheless, it is advisable to stick to this kind of division (which was advocated strongly by Max Muller) because it more or less follows the Indian tradition and conveys the historical sequence fairly accurately.

The *Shrauta Sutras*, regarded as belonging to the Smriti, are late Vedic in language and content. The composition of the Shrauta and Grhya Sutras marks the end of the Vedic period, and at the same time, the beginning of the Vedanga literature (the six auxiliary texts of the Vedas).

While production of Brahmanas and Aranyakas ceased with the end of the Vedic period, a large number of Upanishads were composed after the end of the Vedic period. But to make them authentic, the followers of these Upanishads claim them to be belonging to the lost portions of the Vedas.

It is believed by many scholars that the four kinds of Vedic texts: *Samhita*, *Brahmana*, *Aranyaka* and *Upanishads* were actually meant for people belonging to the four *ashrama*: Brahmacharya, Garhasthya, Vanaprastha, and Sannyasa respectively. Although the subject matters in the four divisions of the Vedas tend to overlap, the preponderance of prayer, rituals, contemplation, and knowledge respectively indicate that the view held by the scholars may be correct. However, there is no specific instruction regarding this.

Vedic Shakhas

The Vedic literature that has come down to us is attached to various traditional schools of recitation and ritual called the ‘*shakhas*’. All the four Vedas have more than one *shakha* at present, but in the past, the number of shakhas studied was many times more. According to Patanjali, there were 21 shakhas of Rigveda, 9 of Atharvaveda, 101 of Yajurveda (86 of Krishna Yajurveda and 15 of Shukla Yajurveda, according to later authorities) and a 1000 varieties of chanting of Samaveda. Maybe, the number 1000 for the Samaveda merely refers to ‘numerous’.

Two different Vedic shakhas might share one or more texts amongst themselves. Conversely, the distinction between two shakhas of the same Veda might result from the use of a different Samhita text, and/or a different Brahmana text, and/or different *Kalpasutra* text and so on. A group or a community of people who study a particular shakha in its entirety (Samhita + Brahmana + Aranyaka + Kalpasutra + any additional texts) and perform its ritual constitute a ‘*charana*’.

The various shakhas of the Vedas were, at one time, spread throughout South Asia. Their geographical location has not been constant down the ages, as Brahmins of a particular shakha migrated from one part of India to the other, or adopted another shakha for some reason.

Language of the Vedas

Early Vedic language was a pitch accent language in which the same alphabet was used in three different ways -- *Udatta*, *svarita*, *anudatta*; the higher on scale, the normal, and the lower. This helped the Vedic sages to adjust the rhythm and melody of the hymns, and were considered extremely important during pronunciation.

The kind of Sanskrit used in the Vedas became obsolete long ago. Even the words and expressions used there are now difficult to understand. The meaning of the major portion of the Rig Veda is clear, but some hymns and a great many of the single stanzas are still obscure or unintelligible. This was already the case in the time of Yaska, the author of the *Nirukta* (in which the Vedic grammar, etymology, and semantics are explained), the oldest available commentary (c. 700 B.C.) on about 600 detached stanzas of the Rig Veda.; for he quotes one of his predecessors, Kautsa, as saying that the Vedic hymns are obscure, difficult to understand, and mutually contradictory.

In the 13th century, the celebrated Vedic scholar Sayanacharya, wrote his famous commentaries on the Vedas. It is mainly with the help of these commentaries and the *Nirukta* that we are able to understand the contents of the Vedas.

Secular Matters in the Vedas

Secular hymns: Scholars believe that less than 20 hymns of the *Rig Veda* are secular in character. These have a special value since they throw some light on the earliest thought and civilisation of India. They talk of wedding, funeral rites, and one of them [R. X. 34] is the lamentations of a gambler who, unable to resist the fascination of the dice, deplores the ruin to which he has brought on his family.

However, traditionalists do not accept that there is anything secular in the Vedas; everything is subjected to religious norms, sometimes openly, sometimes in a couched language. For example, the hymn related to the lamentations of the gambler is actually a mantra used for driving away the evil spirit that causes the tendency to gamble. Similarly the hymns to the frog (VII.103) are used for getting rains when they fail to come on time.

Mythological dialogues: Besides several mythological dialogues in which the speakers are divine beings, there are two in which both agents are human. One is a somewhat obscure colloquy (R. X. 95) between the mortal Puraravas and the *apsara* Urvasi, who is on the point of forsaking him. The other one (R. X. 10) is the dialogue between Yama and Yami, the twin parents of the human race. This group of hymns has a special literary interest as the forerunner of the dramatic works of a later age.

Riddles: Two hymns of the Vedas consist of riddles. One of these (R. VIII. 29) describes various gods without mentioning their names.

There is an elaborate and obscure poem of fifty-two stanzas (R.I.164), in which a number of riddles, largely connected with the sun are propounded in mystical and symbolic language.

Geographical data: From the geographical names mentioned in the *Rig Veda*., it has been inferred that when the hymns were composed, the sages occupied the territory corresponding to Punjab of to-day. The interesting mention in the Vedas is of the river Saraswati, now extinct. Scholars were

concluding many things from the misrepresentation of the fact, but recent developments have proved the existence of that river.

Historical data: According to some scholars, many hymns apparently show that the Indo-Aryans (the early race of the Vedic sages) were engaged in war with the local aborigines, and many victories over these foes have been mentioned. The conquered ones were called 'dasa', which also meant, 'of the dark colour. But, this theory is now disputed. 'Dasa' may mean anyone with evil tendencies (and were considered non-sacrificers and non-believers of law, and morality), and victory over them may mean the victory of the good over the bad.

Society: Incidental references scattered throughout the hymns supply a good deal of information about the social conditions of the time. The family, with the father at its head, was the basis of society, and women held a freer and more honoured position than in later times. Many women were sages, and contributed in the composition of the hymns.

Rig Veda (X.18.8) and Atharva Veda have hymns which talk of the wooing by a young man of the just widowed lady for remarriage. Also in Atharva Veda (9.5.27) there is a clear mention of widow remarriage.

Occupation: The caste system had already started growing in India, but had not yet become as rigid as it became later on. So, the distribution of occupations to people belonging to various guilds was already in practice. Also, the need to pass on the Samhita to a worthy disciple, necessitated the crystallisation of the caste system.

Religion in the Vedas

The Vedas are the first attempt in recorded history of mankind to express the Divine in words. So these sacred books present before us the various layers of understanding of spiritual matters. No wonder that these layers appear to many as confusing, and to some others as contradictory. But in reality these ideas are complimentary, and are more like stepping stones to the highest truth.

Vedas are about Nature worship, and not about ancestor worship: Scholars all over the world believe that religion began with the practice of ancestor worship. But this cannot be accepted as true in the case of the Vedas.

The Vedic religion began with nature worship, as we have seen earlier. Swami Vivekananda says, 'The human mind seems to struggle to get a peep behind the scenes. The dawn, the evening, the hurricane, the stupendous and gigantic forces of nature, its beauties, these have exercised the human mind, and it aspires to go beyond, to understand something about them. In the struggle they endow these phenomena with personal attributes, giving them souls and bodies, sometimes beautiful, sometimes transcendent. Every attempt ends by these phenomena becoming abstractions whether personalised or not.'

The gods and their life: The gods of the Vedas are largely personifications of the powers of nature. The hymns are mainly invocations of these gods, and are meant to accompany the offering that is made in the fire during a yajna. In the Rigveda, it is stated that there are 33 gods divided into three groups of eleven, distributed in earth, air, and heaven. Many other deities, such as the Maruts, are not included in this number. The gods were believed to have had a beginning, but were not projected as having come into being at the same time. Rigveda occasionally refers to earlier gods; and certain deities are described as the offspring of others.

The gods were conceived of as human in appearance. Their bodily parts are figurative illustrations of the phenomena of nature represented by them. For

example, the arms of the Sun are his rays; and the tongue and limbs of Agni are the flames of fire. Some of the gods appear as warriors, especially Indra, while others like Agni and Brihaspati are priests. All of them drive through the air in cars, drawn chiefly by steeds, but sometimes by other animals. The favourite food of men is also that of the gods, which include non-vegetarian items. These are offered to them in the sacrifice, which is either conveyed to them in heaven by the god of fire, or they come physically to join the sacrifice. Their favourite drink is *Soma rasa*, the exhilarating juice of the Soma plant. The home of the gods is heaven, where cheered by draughts of Soma, they live a life of bliss.

Attributes of the gods: Being great and mighty, their most prominent attribute is power. They regulate the order of nature and also defeat creatures with evil tendencies (like *asuras*). They hold sway over all creatures; no one can thwart their ordinances or live beyond the time they appoint, and the fulfilment of desires of human beings is dependent on them. They are benevolent beings who bestow prosperity on mankind. They are described as 'true' and 'not deceitful', being friends and protectors of the honest and righteous, but punishing sin and guilt.

These gods have many features common in them, such as power, brilliance, benevolence, and wisdom. This identification was further increased by the practice of invoking deities in pairs (mentioned later)-- a practice that made many gods share a lot of common characteristics.

Classification of gods: The Vedic gods may be classified as deities of heaven, air, and earth. The celestial gods are Dyaus, Varuna, Mitra, Surya, Savitr, Pusan, the Asvins, and the goddesses Usas, and Ratri. The atmospheric gods are Indra, Rudra, the Maruts, Vayu, Parjanya, and the Waters. The terrestrial deities are Prthivi, Agni, and Soma. There are also certain rivers that are personified and invoked in the Rigveda, the most important of them is Saraswati.

The nature and character of the gods will be discussed in a latter section.

Abstract deities: One can clearly see the flow of worship from the concrete to the abstract, which also gave rise to abstract deities. For example, 'Dhatri'

was an attribute of Indra, but later on became itself a deity who was responsible for the creation of the earth, sun and moon.

There are a few other abstract deities whose names were originally epithets of older gods, but later became epithets of the supreme God. For example, the epithet Visvakarman, 'all-creating', appears as the name of an independent deity. The concept of a Supreme God, as we understand it now, evolved a little later.

The second and smaller class of abstract deities are those who are the personification of abstract nouns. In this class are the Manyu, 'Wrath'; Sraddha, 'Faith'; Anumati, 'Favour (of the gods)'; Nirrti, 'Disease', and others.

A purely abstract deity is Aditi, whose main characteristic is the power of delivering from the bonds of physical suffering and moral guilt. It was much later that she was personified as the mother of the small group of deities called Adityas, 'sons of Aditi'.

Goddesses: Only a few goddesses are mentioned in the Vedas, of whom, Usas and Sarasvati are the famous ones. Sarasvati is celebrated in two whole hymns (R. VI. 61, and R. VII. 95) as well as parts of others. There are others like Vac, 'Speech' (R.X. 71. 125), Prthivi, 'Earth', and Ratri, 'Night'. The wives of the great gods are insignificant, being mere names formed from those of their consorts, and altogether lacking in individuality.

Dual Divinities: A novel feature of the religion of the Rigveda is the invocation of pairs of deities whose names are combined as compounds. About two dozen such pairs are mentioned. The most famous of these pairs are Mitra-Varuna, and Dyava-prthivi.

Groups of Deities: There are also groups of gods like the Maruts (wind gods) who attend on Indra. The smaller group of the Adityas, of whom Varuna is the chief, is constantly mentioned in company with their mother Aditi. Their number is stated to be seven or, with the addition of Martanda, eight. A much less important group, without individual names or definite number, is that of the Vasus, whose leader is generally Indra.

Lesser Divinities: Besides the higher gods, there are a number of lesser divine powers, of which the most prominent are the Ribhus. They are three divinities with marvellous skills, which made them divine. There is also the mention of an apsara (celestial dancer), and a gandharva (celestial musician). In later literature, these two celestial beings became more numerous. There are also a few divinities who are guardians watching over the welfare of the homes and fields of human beings. For example, Sita, the 'Furrow', is invoked to give rich crops and blessings.

We also find the rivers, waters, and the mountains praised as divinities. Also deified are the sacrificial implements like mortar, pestle, sacrificial post etc.

The Demons: They are often mentioned of as two kinds. The higher and more powerful class are the aerial foes of the gods, called the asuras. Danu was the mother of these *asuras*, so they are also called *dānava*.

The second or lower class of demons are the terrestrial ones who are the enemies of men. Their generic name is *Rakshasas*. Another class of demons scarcely referred to in the Rigveda, but often mentioned in other Vedas, are the *Pisachas*, eaters of raw flesh and corpses.

The Pitris: The term fathers (*pitris*) in the Veda means the first ancestors, but the term is also used to generally mean the totality of the dead, whose last rites have been performed according to the Vedic injunctions. These *pitris* are immortal, equal to gods, their comrade-in-arms, and desirous of offerings by their descendent. Mantras used for making food offerings to them end with *svadhā*, whereas the offerings made to the gods, end with *svāhā*.

However, these *pitris* are the antithesis of gods, for, a person who gets attracted to *pitriloka*, cannot proceed further in his spiritual journey. This idea was first mentioned in the Brahmanas and was further developed in later literature. It is for this reason that eating of *shrāddha* food is discouraged for spiritual aspirants.

Rituals: When gods have appeared in a religion, can rituals be far behind? Once the Vedic sages came up with the concept of gods, the practice of

making offerings to them became more and more pervasive. Soon there were rituals for the various hours of the day, for different special days, seasons, occasions and purpose. The Samhita and the Brahmana literature are mostly about these *yajna*.

The aspects of these rites and sacrifices will be discussed in a later section. Here we only mention that these sacrifices were of two types: domestic, *grihya*, and public, *shruta*. The former did not require the presence of priests, whereas the latter required them.

Do's and don'ts: Being a guide to the path of *pravritti* (religion characterised by action), the Vedas discuss *vidhi* (injunctions) and *nisedha* (prohibitions) in the form of rituals, and a few codes of individual conduct. These were further classified as *Nitya* (daily rituals), *naimittika* (rituals performed on special occasions), *kāmya* (rituals related to some desired goal), *prāyaschitta* (penances), and *nisiddha* (prohibited actions).

The code givers of later times made a thorough job of this aspect of the Vedas, and tied the Hindu race in the rigours of rituals. This class of literature came to be known as *Smritis*.

Morality: The term in the Vedas for the cosmic moral laws, ritual, and order -- all in one-- is *rtam*, which is higher even to the gods.

Vrata (religious observances) are performed in accordance with *rtam*; *dharma* is the ritual support of *vrata*; *shraddhā* is the power that allows one to perform *vrata*; and *tapas* is that which is released from the body due to the efforts made during ascetic effort (during *vrata*, or other religious rites).

Atman: There can be no religious life unless one accepts the continuation of life in some form after death. One can be moral without this idea, but cannot be religious.

The whole of Vedic literature and the later scriptures of Indian origin accepted the presence of something permanent behind the impermanent body. This was called *jiva* (the soul). Why else would one worry about making sacrifices and leading a moral life?

With time, the idea of the self, transmigrating through heaven and hell, was perfected. But the sages soon realised that this was a naive concept. Finally the Upanishadic sages came up with the remarkable solution to the great riddle of existence. They proclaimed: *Atman is Brahman* -- the Individual is one with the Universal. This unique concept of Atman (different from jiva) differentiates Hinduism from all other religions. A thorough discussion on the nature of Atman can be found in the Upanishad section.

Karma and Rebirth: The concept of rebirth came pretty early on in the Vedas, but the term signifying *samsāra* and total migration was coined in the *Katha Upanishad* (Atharva Veda) only. The idea was the logical fall out of the law of cycle, according to which, a thing that has happened once, will happen again. Later on, this doctrine was to become the most powerful and profound pillar of Hindu philosophy.

Heaven and hell: The early ideas of the dead in the Rig Veda were that they went by "the path that their fathers had taken" and reached heaven, where they were awaited by pleasure, idleness and enjoyment. Those who practised asceticism, performed sacrifices, gave gifts, cultivated *rtam* (universal moral order), and studied the Vedas reached these *sukrita loka* (heaven).

The idea of hell developed later and gradually. The place was reserved for the enemies of the Vedas, impious, and greedy.

However, by the Upanishadic times, it was universally accepted that both these abodes of the dead were only temporary places of residence. After the exhaustion of its karma, the soul returned back to earth to continue with its journey towards liberation, *mukti*.

Mukti: The concept of mukti is the culmination of the great spiritual truth: *Atman is Brahman*. In the state of mukti, one transcends the states of duality like pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, birth and death etc. and experiences unalloyed, and infinite joy.

The sages also realised that the mukti (liberation) of a soul was not possible through any sacrifice, asceticism, moral observance, or any other action; it could be achieved only through the knowledge of the Self.

Vedic hymns are god-centred: Vedic hymns, as mentioned earlier, are mostly in praise of god, their life stories, mythologies connected with them, and the method by which oblations can be offered to them. In between these, one does get a peep at the higher philosophy of life. These occasional utterings were later developed fully in the Upanishads.

The idea of Infinity: Unlike the mythologies of other religions, the Vedas treat their gods as expressions of the Infinite. For example, Indra is described as having a body, and is also described as being omnipresent and omnipotent. Most of these gods are treated as beings in whom the whole universe exists, who can read every mind, and who are also the ruler of the universe.

It was through this idea of infinity that the sages came up with the idea of *Ekam Sat Vipra Bahudha Vadanti*--That which exists is One; sages call It by various names. To the sages, the Being perceived was one and the same, but the perceiver was different. And, that is how they sang out:

They call him Indra, Mitra, Varuna, Agni,

And there is the Divine nobly winged Garutmān

To what is One, sages give many a name

And call It Agni, Yama, Matarisvān.
164-46)

(Rigveda. I.

Beginning of Monotheism without the ideas of fear and sin: Monotheism (the doctrine of one God), came very early in the Vedas, but not in the form that the Semitic religions believe. As mentioned earlier, the gods were taken up one by one and made into the Supreme God. In the case of Varuna, the sages even came up with the idea of sin and fear (the essential component of all monotheistic religions), but these ideas were soon given up as demeaning. Later, the sages were to give up the very idea of monotheism itself, realising that it was too inadequate to explain the world.

The answer to mysteries lies within: The Vedas teach both *pravritti* (prohibitions and injunctions in the life of a householder), and *Nivriti* (giving up of all worldly enjoyments) as twin spiritual ideals.

The sages realised that by nature the senses are limited, and are capable of getting only the external sense data. This meant that they were not in a position to grasp the supreme self, which is infinite, and behind the world of phenomena. That was when the sages declared that all philosophical search for spirituality had to be internal and not external.

The reality of the external world is obvious to every human being. This obvious presence of the external world logically suggests the presence of a Creator God. However, the presence of this kind of God always poses serious logical fallacies, and instead of remaining infinite, He is reduced to being finite. It is at this point that true spirituality is born. True spirituality preaches that God is beyond and untouched by Creation, and search for Him must be made within one's own heart.

Vedas culminated into Vedanta: The sages reached those heights of philosophy where even the most daring would be frightened. How?

The Vedas were never monotheistic. So in the ultimate analysis, the sages realised that 'behind the unreal, God alone was Real'. This meant that everything other than God, was unreal. Even the rituals, scriptures, and injunctions were equally unreal when it came to the ultimate realisation.

So, in the last leg of the spiritual journey, a person had to give up even those supports with the help of which he had made his spiritual journey so far. At that final stage, he had to depend only on his purified mind for the realisation of his self. The Vedas declare, '*tatra vedaveda bhavati*' – in that state the Vedas become *aveda*, of no significance. This indeed is the ultimate in boldness for any spiritual seeker, for, no Christian, or a Muslim can ever think of outgrowing his scripture.

This inward turning gave birth to real philosophy, which came to be known as Vedanta. Swami Vivekananda says, 'And they found out step by step that that which is external is but a dull reflection at best of that which is inside. ... He is not a God outside, but He is inside; and they took Him from there

into their own hearts. Here He is, in the heart of man, the Soul of our souls,
the Reality in us.'

Post Vedic Influence

Philosophy: Philosophies and sects that developed in the Indian subcontinent have taken differing positions on the Vedas. Schools of Indian philosophy which cite the Vedas as their authority are classified as āstika, "orthodox". The other one is nāstika, "heterodox" or "non-Vedic" schools, which comprise of Chārvāka (materialism), Buddhism and Jainism. So, a philosophy can be called "Hindu" only if it accepts the authority of the Vedas as supreme.

Religion: The Vedas contain all the four essential pillars of religion: ritual, mythology, philosophy, and conduct. But they were not fully evolved. It was for the sages of later period to develop each of these four aspects separately as. Rituals were taken up by Tantra, mythology was taken up by the Puranas, philosophy evolved into Upanishads, and code of conduct evolved into Smritis.

Poetry: The Vedic poetry evolved into *The Ramayana*, and *The Mahabharata*, which also came to be known as epics. Vedic poetry had a tremendous impact on the Indian psyche, and it influenced nearly every poet of later times.

Society: The society of the Vedic period had started organising itself in *varna* and *ashrama* (the caste, and the four stages). Although these were not as rigid as they were in later times, they were also not as fluid as one might suppose. The norms that were set by the Vedic sages, and the practises that were advocated by them, continue to be in vogue even today. Only necessary additions and corrections, considered useful for the contemporary society, have been made over the years.

Contents of the Vedas

Rig Veda

The hymns of the *Rig Veda* are considered the oldest and most important of the Vedas. *Atharva Veda* and *Yajurveda* draw heavily from it, and nearly the whole of *Samaveda* is a collection of hymns from this sacred book.

The *Rig Veda* has 1028 hymns (*suktas*) divided into ten *mandalas* (books). The shortest *sukta* (hymn) has 1 verse, whereas the longest has 58 verses. The total number of verses in it is 10,462. Each *sukta* consists of a number of verses, which are called *richā*. Here it may be mentioned that the verses of the Vedas are in general called mantra (as opposed to *shloka*, of other works), and also have specific names like *rik*, or, *richā*.

The hymns addressed to various divinities vary in frequency. The maximum number of hymns, 250, are addressed to Indra, followed by Agni with 200. These hymns were used, and are still used as prayers during a sacrifice (*yajna*). The priest who recited these verses was known as *hotr*.

The chief gods of the *Rig Veda* are Indra, a heroic god who is praised for having slain his enemy Vrtra; Agni, the sacrificial fire; and Soma, the sacred potion. Other prominent gods are Mitra-Varuna and Ushas (the dawn). Also invoked are Savitr, Vishnu, Rudra, Pushan, Brihaspati, Brahmanaspati, as well as deified natural phenomena such as Dyaus Pita (the sky), Prithivi (the earth), Surya (the sun), Vayu (the wind), Apas (the waters), Parjanya (the rain), Vac (the word), many rivers (notably the Sapta Sindhu, and the Sarasvati River). Groups of deities are the Ashvins, the Maruts, the Adityas, the Ribhus, the Vishvadevas. It contains many other minor gods, persons, concepts, phenomena and items, and sketchy references to historical events.

According to the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the number of syllables in the *Rig Veda* is 432,000, equalling the number of *muhurtas* in forty years (30 *muhurtas* make 1 day). Interestingly, that is also the number of years that

one kalpa (the life span of Brahma, the Creator) has, i.e., 4,320,000,000 years.

This stresses the underlying philosophy of the Vedic books that there is a strong connection between the astronomical, the physiological, and the spiritual.

Sāma Veda

In sanctity, the Sāma Veda ranks next to the Rig Veda. Its Samhita consists of hymns, portions of hymns, and detached verses, taken mostly from the Rig Veda. These were transposed and re-arranged to suit the religious ceremonies in which they were to be employed. Of the 1875 hymns that it contains, most are from the eighth and ninth mandala of the *Rig Veda*, and were sung by the *Udgatri* priests during the Soma sacrifices.

The animal sacrifices did not use Sāma chants, but these chants were extensively used in agricultural rites and in soma rituals. The hymns are addressed to Indra, Agni, and Soma.

The Sāmaveda is considered to be the origin of Indian music. Its melodies use the seven *svaras* or notes. Unfortunately the melodies belonging to the samhita age have not been preserved, and what we have now is only *gāna* of late origin.

In these compiled hymns of the Samaveda, there are frequent variations from the text of the Rig Veda. While singing, the verses are altered further by prolongation, repetition, insertion of syllables, various modulations, rests, and other modifications.

Yajur Veda

The tradition says: *rgvīh stuvanti, yajurbhīh yajanti* -- *rik* mantras are for prayer, and Yajus are for oblation. Consequently the samhita of this Veda

contains mantras which are used in yajna. However, most of these mantras are a collection from Rigveda.

There are two versions of the samhitās of the Yajurveda: *Shukla* (white) and *Krishna* (black). Both contain verses necessary for rituals, but *Krishna Yajurveda* includes the Brahmana prose commentary within the samhita, while the *Shukla Yajurveda* contains the Brahmana as separate texts. However, both contain the same number of verses, 1975. Also, the priest associated with both of them is known as *Adhvaryu*. The job of these priest is to pour oblation in the sacrificial fire during a *yajna*.

Shukla Yajurveda: There are two (nearly identical) shakhas of the *Shukla Yajurveda*: Madhyandiniya, and Kanva. Both are known as Vajasaneyi Samhita. The former is popular in North India, whereas the latter is more popular in the South. It has forty *adhyaya* (sections), and it contains the hymns used in various *yajnas* like, New and Full Moon sacrifices, Agnihotra , Soma yajna , Vajapeya and Rajasuya (two variants of the Soma sacrifice), construction of *yajnavedi*, the altars and hearths, Sautramani (it was originally a ritual to counteract the effects of excessive Soma-drinking), Ashvamedha, Purushamedha, Sarvamedha, Pitriyajna, and Pravargya.

The last, 40th chapter, is *Isa Upanishad*, which is an exception to the character of the work.

Krishna Yajurveda: There are four recension of the Krishna ("black" or "dark") Yajurveda: Taittirīya samhita, Maitrayani samhita, Kathaka samhita, and Kapisthala katha samhita. Each of these recension has a Brahmana associated with it, and some of them also have Aranyakas, Upanishads Shrautasutras, and Grihyasutras.

The best known of these recensions is the *Taittiriya*, which consists of seven books or kandas, divided in chapters or *prapathaka*. These are further subdivided into individual hymns. Some of these mantras have gained particular eminence in Hinduism. The most important of these mantras is the Gaytri mantra. Viswamitra is credited as the seer of this most famous mantra of Hinduism.

Atharva Veda

With its 5987 hymns collected in 20 *kandas* and 731 sections, the *Atharva Veda* is much longer than the Sama and Yajur, and is nearly half the size of *Rig Veda*.

Unlike the other Vedas, it contains a lot of prose, which are all original composition. However, most of its poetic hymns come from the *Rig Veda* (about one-seventh of the whole *Atharva Veda*). This Veda comes in two *shakha*: Shaunaka and Pippalada.

During a sacrifice, the priest belonging to *Atharva Veda* is known as *Brahma*. His duty is to ensure perfection in the *yajna*, and also to check the correctness of the chanting of the hymns. It was the normal practise of *Brahma* to collect half of the offerings made during the sacrifice.

The mantras of *Atharva Veda* were not directly used in any sacrifice, so the other three Vedas came to be known as *trayee*. Due to this many scholars (European) wrongly concluded that *Atharva Veda* was a later creation. The fact is that the hymns of this Veda belong to a particular class of metre, called *chhanda*, and are used primarily as magical spells and incantations. Considering the strong orthodox nature of the Brahmins (who would have never allowed a supervisor from an inferior background, and who also took away half of the total offerings!), the overall content of *Atharva Veda*, it is naive to conclude that *Atharva Veda* was a later addition.

Some of the charms described in *Atharva Veda* are for fever, cough, jaundice, bodily pain, hereditary diseases, leprosy, worms in children, poison, snake bite, mania etc. They also contain charms to grow long hair, for a healthy life, prosperity, for getting a bride, for getting a son, killing one's enemy etc. The book also contains prayers of penances for various sins.

Interestingly, *Atharva Veda* has no *Aranyaka* attached to it.

Summing up

The Vedas set the boundary for Hinduism. Every new spiritual thought of the Hindus must have the sanction of the Vedas. Fortunately, they give tremendous freedom and flexibility to its adherents.

They contain everything that is essential for a man to live a meaningful, dignified and worthy life. They encourage the adherents to earn well and live well, and also goad them towards a highly moral life. They teach the ways and means to achieve anything that a person may be craving for, and they also lead the aspirants toward the Supreme Reality.

In these words of God, no one is left out. There is something for everybody. Even people with strong passions and desires find a way to have their wishes fulfilled through various sacrifices. This is how such people are slowly led towards a higher life.

Above all, the Vedas are unique in the world of scriptures, since they alone proclaim that one has to outgrow everything, including the Vedas, to attain the Supreme.

A few Vedic gods

The names of Vedic gods have an amazing similarity with the Indo-European and Indo-Iranian gods. For example, Dyaus-Pita is equivalent of Greek Zeus, Latin Jupiter (from Deus-pater), and Germanic Tyr; while Mitra is same as the Persian Mithra; Ushas has a similarity with Greek Eos and Latin Aurora; and Latin Ignis and Russian Ogon are equivalent of Agni. These similarities may point to a common ancestry of the Hindus and the Europeans in general and Hindus and the Parsees in particular.

As has been discussed earlier, the Vedic gods are the personification of the power and beauty of nature. The sages took up each of these aspects of nature, meditated upon them, bared their principles and power, and finally discarded them because they were not the satisfactory explanations of the Supreme Reality. However, these gods, and the ideas associated with them are very much relevant today for people who are not spiritually evolved, and also for those who have a special love for mythology. The glorification of nature, as reached in the Vedas, have been an important milestone of the Hindus, and hence these gods continue to impress the common mind in one form or the other.

Given below is the description of some of the popular Vedic gods.

Indra: The name Indra is found in the *Avesta* also, but there it is the name of a demon. In the same book the term *verethraghna* (Vrtrahan) is also found as the designation of the God of Victory, though unconnected with Indra. Thus it seems likely that there was already in the Indo-Iranian period a god resembling the Vrtra-slaying Indra of the Rigveda.

He wields the thunderbolt (*vajra*) which was fashioned for him by Tvast, and he is primarily a god of the thunderstorm who vanquishes the demons of drought or darkness called Vrtra, who holds the waters, and sets them free for the mankind. He also engages in conflicts with numerous minor demons, called *rakshasas* and *asuras*. These ideas were later taken up by the Puranas and woven into enchanting stories.

Indra is praised as the protector, helper, and friend of his worshippers. He is described as bestowing wealth on them. His liberality is so characteristic that the frequent attribute *maghavan*, bountiful, is almost exclusively his.

Agni: With 200 hymns addressed to Agni, the personification of the sacrificial fire, he is second in importance to Indra only. The first words of the Rig Veda begins with a prayer to Agni: *Agni meede purohitam*. The sacrificial fire was already in the Indo-Iranian period the centre of a developed ritual, and was personified and worshipped as a mighty, wise, and beneficent god.

The gods generated him as a form of light for the mankind, and placed him among men. Indra is called Agni's twin brother, and is more closely associated with him than any other god. He is butter-backed, flame-haired, and has a beard, sharp jaws, and golden teeth. With his tongue the gods eat the oblation, and his burning head faces all directions. He is compared with various animals: he resembles a bull, has horns which he sharpens; he is kindled like a horse that brings the gods, and is yoked to convey the sacrifice to them. He is also a divine bird: eagle of the sky; and like a goose when in waters.

Agni is more closely associated with human life than any other deity. He is the only god called *grhapati* lord of the house, and is constantly spoken of as a guest (*atithi*) in human dwellings. He is an immortal who has taken up his abode among mortals. Thus he comes to be termed the nearest kinsman of men. He takes the offerings of men to the gods and also brings the gods to the sacrifice.

As the centre of the sacrifice he comes to be celebrated as the divine counterpart of the earthly priesthood. Hence he is often called priest (*rtvij*, *vipra*) domestic priest (*purohita*), and more often than by any other name invoking priest (*hotr*), also officiating priest (*adhvaryu*) and playing priest (*brahman*). His priesthood is the most salient feature of his character; he is in fact the great priest, as Indra is the great warrior.

Agni's wisdom is often praised. As knowing all the details of sacrifice, he is wise and all-knowing, and is exclusively called *jātá-vedas* he who knows all created beings. He is a great benefactor of his worshippers, protecting

and delivering them, and bestowing on them all kinds of boons, but particularly domestic welfare, offspring, and prosperity.

Varuna: Next to Indra, Varuna is the greatest of the gods of the Rigveda. Sitting in his mansions, he looks at the deeds of all; the spies of Varuna in the form of wind and other elements are said to be everywhere, from whom he gets to know everything. He witnesses men's truth and falsehood. No creature can even wink without his knowledge. His divine dominion is also mentioned as *maya*, and the epithet *mayin* is used for him.

He is the great lord of the laws of nature, who established heaven and earth, and by his law heaven and earth are held apart. It is due to his will that winds blow, the sun shines, and the rivers flow.

Varuna is mainly praised as upholder of *rtam*, physical and moral order. Varuna's ordinances being fixed, he is pre-eminently called *dhrtravrata* -- whose laws are established. The gods themselves follow his ordinances.

As a moral governor Varuna stands far above any other deity. His wrath is aroused by sin, and he punishes the sinners severely. The fetters (*pāśas*) with which he binds sinners are often mentioned, and are characteristic of him. On the other hand, Varuna is gracious to the penitent. He removes sin as if untying a rope. He releases men even from the sin committed by their fathers. He spares him who daily transgresses his laws when a suppliant, and is gracious to those who have broken his laws unknowingly.

Savitr: The word Savitr is derived from the root *su*, which means to stimulate. The God of Gaytri mantra, who has been meditated upon by millions for thousands of years is pre-eminently a golden deity whose car and its pole are golden. Shining with the rays of the sun, yellow-haired, Savitr raises up his light continually from the east. His ancient paths in the air are dustless and easy to traverse, and on them he protects his worshippers; for he conveys the departed spirit to where the righteous dwell. He removes evil dreams, and makes men sinless. He is also connected with the evening as well as the morning; for at his command night comes and he brings all beings to rest.

Savitr is often distinguished from Surya. In some passages, he is said to shine with the rays of the Sun, to impel the sun, or to declare men sinless to the sun. But in other passages it is hardly possible to keep the two deities apart.

Visnu: Visnu occupies a subordinate position in the Rigveda., but becomes very prominent in the later spiritual literature. The central feature of his nature consists in his three steps, connected with which are his exclusive epithets 'wide-going' (*uru-gaya*) and 'wide-striding' (*uru-krama*). With these steps he traverses the earth or the terrestrial spaces. Two of his steps are visible to men, but the third or highest is beyond the flight of birds or mortal ken. He takes his steps for man's existence, to bestow the earth on him as a dwelling.

Another prominent characteristic of Visnu is his friendship for Indra, with whom he is often allied in the fight with Vrtra.

Rudra: Just like Visnu, Rudra occupies a subordinate position in the Rigveda. It was much later that he became quite prominent in his form as Shiva. The epics and the Puranas drew the character heavily from that of Rudra. The famous mantra *traymbakam yajamahe* used universally as prayer to Lord Shiva, comes in the Vedas itself.

Rudra has beautiful lips and wears braided hair. His colour is brown, his form is dazzling, he shines like the radiant sun, is arrayed with golden ornaments, and wears a glorious necklace, drives in a car, holds the thunderbolt in his arm, and discharges his lightning shaft from the sky; but he is usually said to be armed with a bow and arrows, which are strong and swift.

He is fierce and destructive, strongest of the strong, swift, unassailable, unsurpassed in might, young and unaging. He is easily invoked and auspicious (*siva*). He not only preserves from calamity, but bestows blessings. His healing powers are often mentioned; he has a thousand remedies, and is the greatest physician of physicians

Surya: The name Surya is a derivative of *svar* (light), and is similar to *hvare*, the sun in Avesta. In the Vedas, he is the most concrete of the solar

deities. He is far-seeing, all-seeing, the supervisor of the whole world. He beholds all beings, and knows the good and bad deeds of mortals. He arouses men to perform their activities, and is the guardian of all that moves or is stationary. His car is drawn by seven swift mares called *harit*.

His another name is Aditya, son of the goddess Aditi, and his father is Dyaus or Heaven. The gods raised him when he had been hidden in the ocean and placed him in the sky.

Surya shines for all. He dispels darkness, which he rolls up like a skin, or which his rays throw off like a skin into the waters. He measures the days and prolongs life. He drives away sickness, disease, and evil dreams. All creatures depend on him, and the epithet 'all-creating' (*visvá-karman*) is also applied to him. By his greatness he is the divine priest of the gods. At his rising he is requested to declare men sinless to Mitra-Varuna and to other gods.

Soma: The word Soma (Avesta= *Haoma*) means pressed juice, being derived from the root *su* which means to press. It is produced by pressing the stalks of the soma plant (identity is not known now) growing on the mountains, and the juice is made to pass through the filter of sheep's wool. The filtered fluid is called *pavamana* -- flowing clear, and is offered only to *Vayu*. The filtered Soma flows into jars and is mixed with water and milk to make the drink which is dear to the gods. The juice is intoxicating, and is frequently termed *madhu*.

The exhilarating power of Soma led to its being regarded as a divine drink bestowing immortal life. All the gods drink Soma; they drank it to gain immortality. It confers immortality not only on gods, but on men also. It has, moreover, medicinal powers: Soma heals whatever is sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk. Soma also stimulates the voice, and is called 'lord of speech'. He awakens eager thought: he is a generator of hymns, a leader of poets, a seer among priests. Hence his wisdom is much dwelt upon. Thus he is a wise seer, and he knows the races of the gods.

Soma as god, is one of the most prominent deities in the Vedas. He has terrible and sharp weapons, and comes to the sacrifice and receives offerings on the sacred grass.

Yama: Yama is the chief of all the dead whose last rites were performed according to Vedic rites. He is not expressly designated a god, but only a being who rules over the dead. His father is Vivasvat, and he is said to have chosen death of his own will to find out the path for many, to where the ancient Fathers passed away. Thus, death is the path of Yama.

As the first father of mankind and the first of those that died, Yama appears to have originally been regarded as a mortal who became the chief of the souls of the departed. He is associated with Varuna, Brihaspati, and especially Agni, the conductor of the dead, who is called his friend and his priest.

Yama dwells in the remote recess of the sky. In his abode, which is the home of the gods, he is surrounded by songs and the sound of the flute. The owl and the pigeon are mentioned as his messengers, but the two four-eyed, broad-nosed, bridled dogs, sons of *Sarama* are his regular emissaries. They guard the path along which the dead man hastens to join the Fathers who rejoice with Yama. They watch men and wander among the peoples as Yama's messengers, but not in a bad sense. Yama is invoked to lead his worshippers to the gods, and to prolong life.

Purusa: There are seven hymns dealing with the creation of the world as produced from some material. In the well-known *Purusa sukta*, the gods are the agents of creation, while the material out of which the world is made is the body of Purusa, the God. The act of creation is here treated as a sacrifice in which Purusa is the victim, whose body parts became the universe. The Vedas sprung from him, the animals and plants were born of him, and the castes of men came out of him.

Vedic Rishis

Vāchaspatyam, the ancient Sanskrit to Sanskrit dictionary, defines *rishi* as: *rishati jnānena samsāra-pāram* (one who reaches beyond this transmigratory world by means of spiritual knowledge). Etymologically, the word may also mean "to see" or "to realise" spiritual truths.

Going through the Vedas, we realise that it would have been impossible for an ordinary poet, or even an spiritual aspirant to have the wisdom that have been recorded in the Vedas. Commenting on the special attainments of the Vedic rishis, Max Muller said that "these sages climbed up to the heights where their lungs only could breathe, and where those of other beings would have burst." These greats followed reason and meditation wherever it led them, no matter at what cost. They just did not care if all their best beliefs were smashed, never cared for what society of them, or talked about them. That is how they became what they became.

Coming to more realistic plane, we find each hymn of the Rig Veda traditionally attributed to a specific *rishi*, and the "family books" (Rigveda: 2-7) are said to have been the spiritual wisdom received by the various families. The main families, listed by the number of verses ascribed to them are:

Angirasas: 3619 (especially Mandala 6) ; **Kanvas:** 1315 (especially Mandala 8); **Vasishtas:** 1267 (Mandala 7) ; **Viswamitras:** 983 (Mandala 3); **Atris:** 885 (Mandala 5); **Bhrgus:** 473; **Kashyapas:** 415 (part of Mandala 9); **Grtsamadas:** 401 (Mandala 2); **Agastyas:** 316; and **Bharatas:** 170.

Of these, three families stand out as connected with fire sacrifices: Angirasaa, Atharvan, and Bhrigu. As sages, they carried an aura around them, and were respected as divine, having humbled even the gods in their feud with them. Some other sages like Atri were deified to be made one of the seven sages of *saptarshi mandala*.

Manu, as a sage is the living equivalent of what is Yama for the dead. He is also the son of Vivasat, as Yama is, and is considered to be the progenitor of the human race. His name is connected more with the deluge during which the Lord came as *Mina Avatara*.

Viswamitra and Vasistha became more famous as the sage connected with the life of Sri Ramachandra. However, their feud and rivalry became so famous that these stories and their outcome have entered the Indian lore.

Not much is known about the Vedic sages other than what we get in the epics and the Puranas. The little that we gather about them from the later works makes us feel that they considered themselves mere instruments in receiving the divine wisdom and knowledge for the benefit of the mankind.

Despite their impersonal way of life in which rituals and meditation occupied their nearly whole of waking hours, they unknowingly left behind a way of life that was later on emulated by the Brahmins for centuries to come.

Rishikas - The Female sages

We come across quite a few names of the *rishikas* (women Rishis) in the Vedas. Probably none of them was the composers of the Vedic mantras, but they were definitely *samhitākartās*, who assisted in the collection of the Veda mantras. Since the sages normally led a married life, and had children who grew up in the Vedic atmosphere, it was quite natural to have some great *rishikas*.

Some famous great female sages are: Maitreyi who was Yajnavalkya's wife; Gargi, who challenged Yajnavalkya with her sharp questions, Lopamudra (wife of Agastya), who has two mantras (RV I.179.1-2) attributed to her, Roamasa the wife of Svanya, Visvavara belonging to the Atri family, Aangirasi Sarasvati of Angirasa family, Apala of the Atri family, Yami Vaivasvati, Sraddha, Ghosha, Urvashi, Sarama, Poulomi, and others. Most of them are mentioned in the Rigveda.

Yajna: Vedic rites and sacrifices

Broadly speaking, religious acts of an individual, or of a group is *yajna* (religious sacrifice).

Under normal conditions, every act of a person is mundane, and at times, even profane. But when those very acts are performed with a religious outlook, they become *yajna*. Even the simple act of breathing can be transformed into a sacrifice (*Gita*, IV.29) when it is performed with proper attitude. Thus *yajna* (sacrifice) is the consecration of the mundane to the divine. It is the transformation of the profane into the sacred; is the bridge between the material and the spiritual; and is the instrument to convert the belittled to the exalted.

For a person to be spiritual, his acts have to be spiritualised, and for that every act of his has to become a *yajna*. That is why even the act of creation by Purusha (God) was perceived as a *yajna* by the Vedic sages, and was described so (*Purusa Sukta*, *Rig Veda* X. 90) . But, it is impossible for a common man to treat every act of his as a *yajna*, which means that an easier way has to be found for his upward journey towards spirituality.

It was to solve this problem that the Vedic sages came up with the solution of public and private *yajna* for all. Soon they had framed methods by which the life of an individual and the society could be regulated by sacrificial acts. In birth, death, marriage, acquisition, renunciation, sorrow, joy, victory, loss -- there came up a *yajna*.

Slowly these *yajnas* diversified into sacraments (*samskaras*), and sacrifices (offerings and oblations). The sacraments for the individual's private life (like marriage, sacred thread ceremony, funeral rites etc.) grew up to forty in number, but was later brought down to eighteen, then to sixteen in the Smriti period, and finally to ten in the Tantra system. Most Hindus now follow these ten *samskaras*. A brief overview of the *samskaras* will be given in "*An Overview of the Smritis* " .

The *yajna* which were not sacramental (i.e. not a *samskara*) were characterised by offering of oblations to various deities and personalities. The oblations (*haviH*) meant for gods were poured as *ahuti* into fire, known as *homa* , whereas the offerings made to the ancestors and the demigods (Nirriti and the Rakshasas) were known as *bali* and were placed on the strewn grass, or put in water. These practises continue even today. It is believed that in the early days, even the offerings to gods were not made in the fire, but were placed on the ground, or strewn grass, but later on nearly all the offerings were made into fire (*Agni* got a severe stomach problem due to this, as narrated in *Mahabharata*).

Here we discuss only the fire sacrifices addressed to the gods.

The Vedic *yajna* are prayer to the divine in anticipation of something in which the offering (including the sacrificial goat) effects the communication between the mundane and the sacred; and the priest acts both as the agent of the sacrificer and the mouthpiece of the gods.

These fire sacrifices had: a) one single fire used in domestic rites, or b) three fires for bigger sacrifices. In case of the three fires, the most important fire used to be the *Gārhapatya* (of the master of the house), which descended from the domestic hearth of the sacrificer, and was kept perpetually burning. All oblations were cooked in this fire. To its east used to be *Āhāvaniya* fire, in which offerings were made. To the south of the *Gārhapatya*, the *dakshina agni* used to be set, in which the fire used to be brought at the end of a sacrifice.

The Vedic rites can be classified into two groups: *Grihya* (domestic) and *Shrauta* (public), which were characterised respectively by the absence and the presence of priests. *Grihya* sacrifices included the individual *samskaras* (purificatory sacraments), a daily sacrifice called *mahayajna* (great sacrifice), and seven *pākajanya* (cooked sacrifices).

Prayer

Along with the growth and consolidation of the *yajnas*, prayer to the divine also grew in importance. In the Vedas prayers are linked with the sacrifices in the form of a formula (*yajus*), pronounced in a low voice. There were also declamations of verses, called *shastras*, in which 'Aum' was inserted at regular interval.

References are also made in the Vedas to an 'internal' mental sacrifice which can be used in cases of urgency. The part played by thought, side by side with word and action is emphasised many times in various hymns. Later on this concept was taken up by various religious systems as *manasā- vācā - karmanā*, and a devotee was advised to offer all his acts of thinking, speaking, and doing to the Lord.

Although prayer played an integral role in any sacrifice, with time it grew independent of the *yajna*. The independence and the autonomy of prayer ensured its own dynamics, and it soon became powerful enough to overthrow the role of sacrifices in a spiritual life altogether. When the scholars try to present Upanishadic thoughts as a revolt of the *Kshatriyas* against the Brahmins, they overlook the fact that the Upanishads are the natural outcome of the power of prayer to the Self. Any open religious system is sure to reach the state where prayer becomes the essential part of its outlook. Prayers are a kind of paradigm shift in spirituality -- a fact that was recognised and practised by the Vedic sages more than five thousand years ago.

Sections of the Vedas - Brāhmanas

The discussion till now has been on the Samhitā portion of the Vedas. As mentioned earlier, the Vedas have three more sections: Brāhmana, Āranyaka, and Upanishads. Of these, the Upanishads continue to influence the lives and philosophy of the Hindus, but the other two reached a dead end long ago, after giving birth to more specialised branches of religion connected with the issues discussed in them.

Commenting on Taittiriya Samhita 1.2.1, Bhatta Bhaskara defines ‘Brahmanas’ as texts which expound the Vedic mantras and Yajnas. In chapter 2 of his *Kavyamimansa*, Rajasekhar defines the Brahmanas as texts which are characterised by statements of eulogy, censure, exposition and (ritual) application (of mantras). The word is used distinctively to denote certain texts for the first time in *Taittiriya Samhita* 3.7.1.1

Many scholars, modern and ancient, have tried to define the Brahmanas by stating their characteristics. The reality however is that there is no sharp difference in the character of the Mantra and the Brahmana portions of the Vedas. The only thing that we may state safely is this – Mantras are those portions of the Vedas that are designated as such traditionally. And the rest is Brahmana.

Vedic sages felt that there was nothing that could not be achieved by sacrifices – the sun could be stopped from rising, and Indra, the chief of gods, could be deposed from his throne. The *Samhitā* contain the mantras that are required in various sacrifices, but the methodology and the science of the rituals and sacrifices required a separate kind of work.

With the growth of Samhitā literature, the corresponding science of performing the yajna also increased in bulk. With time, these were collected in a special class of literature which was known as *Brāhmana*. The formulas and rules for conducting extremely complex rituals are explained to the minutest detail in these works, and, every ritual is performed with a specific purpose, for which a specific result is described. Thus, for each

Samhitā, there were a number of *Brāhmana*, which are treated as the Veda itself. Unlike the *Samhitā*, the *Brāhmana* are exclusive prose works, although some are accented.

In addition to these, the *Brāhmanas* also contain myths, legends, and narratives to explain or rationalise the then religious practices. The duties of men professing different occupations, the eternity of the Veda, popular customs, cosmogony, historical details, praise of ancient heroes are some other subjects dealt with in the *Brahmanas*. The later philosophical speculations concerning the Self were also a part of the *Brāhmana*, but later it broke free to become a separate section.

Thus, the *Brāhmana* literature can be classified under three sections:

1. *vidhi*, which are the practical sacrificial directions
2. *arthavāda*, (eulogy) which are the explanations of meanings and purpose of the sacrifices
3. *upanishads*, the later philosophical developments which focus on "I am That."

The *Brāhmana* are indispensable if one wants to understand the later religious and philosophical literature of Hinduism. These works are also important to understand the history, science, and growth of priesthood and sacrifices. Most of the beliefs practised in modern Hinduism has been adapted from these works.

Evolution of the religious ideal in the Brāhmana:

Japa: The rationale of the sacrifices were discussed threadbare in the *Brāhmana*, but that did not satisfy every mind. Questions were raised against sacrifices and their methodology. Even gods themselves started becoming redundant. And with all this kind of mental activity poured into the analysis of the rites and their explanation, abstractions were increasing rapidly in the Vedic religion.

As the sacrifices were glorified and given power even over the Vedic gods, the power of the word increased. Japa (the practice of chanting a mantra silently) of 'Aum' practised ascetically with the sacrifices was believed to produce all one's desires. At the same time knowledge was beginning to be valued. In one exchange mind says that speech merely imitates it, but speech emphasises the importance of expression and communication; however, Prajapati decides that mind is more important than the word.

In the long run, the sacrifices went away, the gods went away, prayers and chant went away. What remained was only japam of the sacred 'Aum'. Later, this was also given up to pave way for meditation.

Tapasyā: Prajapati was the father of both the gods and the demons. The ethical principle of truth became stronger as the gods were described as truthful and the demons as not so truthful. However, realising the ways of the world, many complained that the demons grew strong and rich (as people complain even today of those who become successful by taking the wrong path). Instead of telling that the demons would perish due to their own karma, emphasis was laid on the power of goodness. The gods were advised to perform sacrifice, or perish. The gods performed sacrifices that made them triumph over the demons, and also helped them attain Truth.

To emphasise the power of *tapas* and sacrifice, it was said that Prajapati practised tapas to create the world by the heat of his own tapasya. Prajapati not only created, but also entered into things as form and name, giving them order. In the later literature, Prajapati was replaced by Brahma, who was identified with Truth and became the Creator God in the trinity that included Vishnu and Shiva.

Self Analysis: A judgement after death using a scale to weigh good against evil is described in the *Satapatha Brāhmaṇa*. The text recommends that the one who knows this will balance one's actions in this world so that in the next the good deeds will rise, not the evil ones. This concept, however, underwent a great change in later times, and spiritual aspirants were advised to discriminate between the Real and the unreal to attain spiritual wisdom.

Rebirth: Belief in repeated lives through reincarnation is indicated in several passages in the Brāhmaṇas. A beef-eater is punished by being born

as a strange and sinful creature. However, as knowledge rivalled the value of ritual, this new problem of how to escape from an endless cycle of rebirth presented itself automatically, which led to the more abstract philosophy of the Upanishads.

A few Selections from the Brāhmaṇa

Bhrigu, the son of Varuna was devoted to learning. Unfortunately his learning made him egotistic and he thought that he was superior to all, including the gods and his own father. So Varuna decided to make him grow in humility, and had his life breath stopped. This made Bhrigu enter the worlds of death. In the first he saw someone cut another man to pieces and eat him; in the second, one man was eating another who was screaming, and in the third a man was silently screaming. In another world there were two women guarding a treasure, and at one place a stream of blood was guarded by a naked black man with a club, while a stream of butter provided all the desires of golden men in golden bowls. In the sixth world five rivers of blue and white lotuses were flowing. There also was the river of honey, wonderful music, celestial nymphs dancing and singing, and a fragrance enveloping the whole region.

When Bhrigu returned, his father explained to him that the first man represented people who in ignorance destroyed trees, which in turn ate them; the second were those who cooked animals that cried out and in the other world were eaten by them in return; the third were those who ignorantly cooked rice and barley, which screamed silently and also ate them in return; the two women were Faith and non-Faith; the river of blood represented those who squeezed the blood out of a Brahmin, and the naked black man guarding the river was Anger; but the true sacrificers were the golden men, who got the river of butter and the paradise of the five rivers. - *Satpatha Brahmana XI.6.1*

“Prajapati alone existed before this Universe came into being. The word certainly was his only possession. Therefore, the word was the second. He desired: ‘Let me emit this very word, it will pervade this whole (space). He emitted the word and it pervaded the whole (space). It rose upwards and spread, as a continuous (well joined) stream of water.” -- *Tāndya Brāhmaṇa 20.14.2*

“Some ask- ‘If a man establishes the sacrificial fire and then dies while touring abroad, then how does one do his Agnihotra? To this, we reply that it is to be performed by offering the oblation of the milk of a cow which has been suckled by a calf that is not its own. This is because the milk of such a cow is akin in nature to the Agnihotra of such a dead man. Alternately, perform the Agnihotra with the milk of any cow. Others state the relatives of the dead man should keep the alters of that man fired up without offering sacrificial oblations till the bones of the dead man have been collected after cremation of his corpse. And if the corpse is not traceable, then twigs from 360 ‘flame of the forest’ trees should be cut and fashioned into a human figure. This should then be cremated with full ceremony and at that time, the fires from the altar established by the dead man should be extinguished by a transfer to his funeral pyre. The likeness of the corpse should be created in this manner- 150 twigs for the torso, 140 for the twigs for the two thighs. 50 for the legs and the rest should be placed above its head. Thus ends the procedure for the atonement performed for a man who establishes a sacrificial fire in the altar but dies while touring abroad.”

Sections of the Vedas - Āranyakas

As appendices to nearly all the Brāhmanas are the texts known as *Āranyakas* (lit. forest texts). The main content of these texts are the mysticism and symbolism of sacrifice and priestly philosophy. In turn these *Āranyakas* end in the Upanishads. Although the very orthodox Vedic schools did not give much importance to the *Āranyakas* and the Upanishads, these are extremely important for the Vedanta philosophy. The Vedantins do not see Upanishads as the end of the Vedas, but as the final aim of the Vedas.

The Aranyakas were called the forest texts because the ascetics who taught them used to retreat into the forest, and the disciples used to follow them there. This resulted in a loss of emphasis on the sacrificial rites that were performed in the villages and the towns. It is believed that these texts were for the *Vānaprasthis* (those who had completed their worldly duties and renounced them), who were supposed to meditate on the mystical significance of the sacrifices only. Thus the Aranyakas were the transitional link between the Brāhmanas and the Upanishads; they discussed rites, had magical content, lists of formulas and the hymns from the Vedas, but also had the early speculations and intellectual discussions that finally flowered in the Upanishads.

The *Taittiriya Aranyaka* tells how when some great sages were approached by some ordinary sages for instruction, they refused. But when the sages came back with faith and tapas, they were instructed.

The sense of social morality also started growing: truth was considered to be the highest value, debtors were in fear of punishment in hell, and immorality was condemned.

The emphasis now was on spiritual knowledge. The concept of *prana* as the life energy of the breath was exalted and was declared to be present in trees, animals, and people in ascending order. Human immortality was identified with the atman, and not with the body. Hell was still feared, but it was

believed that by practising *tapasya*, one could hope to be born in a better world after death or be liberated from rebirth. Non-attachment (Vairagya) was also declared to be the great purifier of the body and the liberator from the cycle of life and death.

Brahman, the Supreme Reality, and Atman, the individual's essence, were now more important than gods and sacrifices. The guardians of the spiritual treasures of the community were called Brahnavadins (those who discussed Brahman).

A few Selections from the Aranyaka

“They said: ‘Sir, you are the teacher, you are the teacher. What has been said has been duly fixed in mind by us. Now answer a further question. Fire, air, Aditya (sun), time, prana, food, Brahma, Rudra, Vishnu- some meditate upon one, some meditate upon another. Tell us- which one is the best for us?’ Then he replied to them: “All these are merely the manifest forms of Brahman, the Immortal, the Formless. To whichever form each man is devoted here, in the realm of that deity does that man rejoice. For it has been said- ‘This whole is Brahman (*Brahma khalvidam vāṁ sarvam*). These, which are its manifest forms that one meditates on, worships and finally discards. For, by meditation upon these forms, one moves to higher and higher realms, and when all things perish, one attains unity with the Purusha!’” -- *Maitrayani Aranyaka*

'He by Whom all this Universe is pervaded-- the earth and the mid region, the heaven and the quarters and the sub-quarters, that Purusha is fivefold and is constituted of 5 elements. He who has attained the Supreme Knowledge through *Sannyāsa* (renunciation) is indeed this Purusha. He is all that is in the present, was in the past and will be in the future. Though apparently human, his true nature is that which is settled by the Vedas and what is attained by his new birth is in right knowledge. He is firmly established in the richness of knowledge imparted by his teacher, as also in his faith and in Truth. He has become the self resplendent. Being such a one, He remains beyond the darkness of ignorance. O Aruni! Having become one possessed of knowledge by realising Him, the Supreme, through sannyasa, and with your mind fixed in your heart, do not again fall a prey to death, because sannyasa is the supreme means of spiritual

realisation, therefore wise men declare that to be above all the means of liberation.' -- *Taittiriya Aranyaka*, X.79

'Thereafter, when the body is made fit for a state of desirelessness, he should be bent over the offering to Brahman. In this way, he will drive repeated deaths away. "The Soul is to be envisioned, to be heard, to be thought of and to be meditated upon." "Him (the Soul) they aspire to know by reciting the Vedas, by practicing the rigors of studentship (including celibacy), by asceticism, by faith, by ritual sacrifices and by fasting" says Sage Mandukeya. "Therefore, he who knows this should, becoming tranquil, restrained (in senses), still in meditation, enduring of the opposites and immersed in faith, perceive the Soul in his own soul," thus says Sage Madavya. That Purusha, who lives in the midst of life forces, and is a repository of consciousness, is incomprehensible and ought to be distinguished (from the animate and inanimate creation) as 'Not this, Not this' ." "This Soul alone is the Kshatriya, it is the Brahminhood, it is all the divine beings, the Vedas, all the worlds, it is all beings, indeed it is all! This Soul is that is designated by 'Tat tvam asi' (That Thou are). This Soul is to be comprehended in 'I am Brahman'. This Brahman (the Supreme Soul), without any predecessor, without any superior, without another equivalent, immanent in all, without an exterior (i.e. all pervading), is this Soul-- the Brahman (the Supreme Being), the entity that experiences everything in the Universe-- such is the doctrine"- says Sage Yajnavalkya. ' ---
Shāṅkhyāyana Aranyaka

The Upanishads

There are as many Upanishads to each Veda as there are Sakhas, branches or recension, i.e., 21, 102 (according to some, 109), 1000 and 50 respectively to the four Vedas (The *Rig*-Veda, The Yajur-Veda, The Sama-Veda and the Atharva-Veda). However, just like the lost recension, the corresponding Upanishads are also lost.

According to various sources, there are different number of important Upanishads, but Acharya Shankara has commented upon eleven: Isa, Kena, Katha, Mundaka, Mandukya, Prasna, Aitareya, Taittiriya, Chhandogya, Brihadaranyaka, and Svetasvatara. There are some upanishads coming from very old times other than these, but nearly all of the other upanishads (including *Allahopanishad*) is a later addition. These later works claim to belong to the lost portions of the Vedas, which can neither be proved nor disproved.

The fundamental principle governing the Upanishads is the great spiritual realisation that "Atman is Brahman" -- the individual is one with the Universal.

Because of their importance and vastness, the Upanishads will be discussed in a separate section.

The Vedangas

From the aspect of the spiritual tradition, the Vedangas do not have much importance, because they act as auxiliaries to the Vedas. These subjects of study were quite important for the performance of Vedic rites and sacrifices, but they had no direct role in the spiritual life of a person. In later times, the evolved branches of these Vedangas were taken up by the greats of their fields and made into a complete *shastra*, which when followed devotedly, could take one to the realisation of the Supreme Reality.

There are six Angas or explanatory limbs, to the Vedas: *Sikshā* (Phonetics), *Vyakarana* (Grammar), *Chhanda* (Prosody metre), *Nirukta* (etymology), *Jyotisha* (Astronomy and astrology), *Kalpa* (Srauta, Grihya, Dharma and Sulba).

Sikshā: In the *Taittiriya Upanishad* there is the famous mantra: " Aum. We will expound *siksha*, or the science of pronunciation. It deals with sound, pitch, quantity, force, modulation and combination. Thus is explained the lesson on pronunciation."

As mentioned in the above Upanishad, Sikshā was the science of pronunciation. The oldest phonetics textbooks are the *Prātishakyas* that describe pronunciation and intonation as well as the rules of sandhi of the vedic Sanskrit. These books were specific to the individual *Shakhas* of the Vedas. With time, more popular versions of these *Prātishakhya* came into existence which were known as *siksha*.

The importance of the study of this branch of study has been beautifully stressed in a popular story (*Taittiriya Samhitā*, 2.4.12): Tvasta, the divine carpenter wanted to take a revenge on Indra, and hence conducted a yajna to beget a son who would destroy Indra. When he chanted the mantra, '*Indrasatur varddhasva...*' , he went wrong in intonation: he was supposed to pronounce "indra" without raising or lowering the syllables in it, whereas "tru" and "rddha" should have been raised (*udatta*). Had Tvasta pronounced correctly, it would have meant 'May Tvasta's son grow to be the slayer of

Indra'. Unfortunately because of the wrong intonation, the mantra now meant, 'May Indra grow to be killer of this son (of mine).' Consequently, Tvasta's son was killed by Indra, although there was no change in the wordings of the mantra, only the change in the stress of the letters caused this havoc.

Vyākaraṇa:

The Vedic grammar is lost forever but the remnant of it can be found in the works of Panini's grammar.

Chhandas: This the science of prosody. There are very few books left on this subject, that too of very late origin. Sutrās of Pingala on metrics is one of the more famous one, but this was also recorded much after the Vedic period.

Chhandas expound the 'metres of the gods', the 'metres of Asuras' etc., and treat the seven famous metres of the Vedas, along with the other complex metres. Reflections on the names and forms of metres, and the mysticism of the syllable and of the verse were developed to an extraordinary extent in the hymns of the *Samhitā*, and also the *Brāhmanas*.

Nirukta: This Vedāṅga is the philosophy of etymology, but deals exclusively with the words of *Rig veda*. Yaska's Nirukta is the only famous work that has come down to us, which in itself is the commentary of an earlier work, *Nighantu*. It is in the form of explanations of words, and is the basis for later lexicons and dictionaries.

Jyotiṣa: The importance of the Vedic sacrifices necessitated the drawing up of the calendar for rituals and fix the proper times for the sacrifices. This meant that the sages had to study the movements of the planets and observe the celestial phenomena in detail. It was thus that the science of astronomy and astrology came up in India.

Kalpa: It is the description of the methodology of ritual. To help the priests perform the various details connected with a sacrifice, a kind of manual was worked out. With time every Veda had its own handbook (written in short form, known as *sūtra*) of rituals, which came to be known as Kalpa. Thus

the *Shrauta Sutras* (dealing with public sacrifices), *Grihya Sutras* which concern domestic life and the *Dharma Sutras* which deal with ethics, customs and laws -- all belong to Kalpa. The *Sulba*, which treat of the measurements necessary for laying out the sacrificial area, also belong to Kalpa.

Among the Kalpa Sutras, the works of Asvalayana, Sankhayana, Gobhila, Katyayana, Apastamba, Hiranyakesi, Bodhayana, Bharadvaja are more famous.

In later times, the Kalpa evolved into *Smriti* literature of law books, of which *Manusmriti* became the most famous.

Conclusion

The Hindus consider the Vedas to be synonymous with knowledge. However, even a brief survey of the Vedas, as presented in this short monograph, is enough to make one realise that the Vedas (which include the rituals, the code of conduct, mythologies, and the philosophy of Vedanta) are synonymous with religion. Whatever principle or practice is there in the religious world can be found in the Vedas, although not every religion can be traced to it. Swami Vivekananda says, '.. the Vedanta, applied to the various ethnic customs and creeds of India, is Hinduism. The first stage, i.e. Dvaita, applied to the ideas of the ethnic groups of Europe, is Christianity; as applied to the Semitic groups, Mohammedanism. The Advaita, as applied in its Yoga-perception form, is Buddhism etc. Now by religion is meant the Vedanta; the applications must vary according to the different needs, surroundings, and other circumstances of different nations.'

The spiritual experiences of Sri Ramakrishna have once again proved that the Vedas are infallible. The experiences portrayed in many of the hymns of the Vedas were thought to be poetic in nature by the scholars, but Sri Ramakrishna had those experiences even before he knew of the existence of such Vedic passages.

It is wrong to search for any kind of religious evolution in the Vedas; the ideas are as they are. The Vedic sages meditated upon the various aspects of the external and the internal nature to come up with the ultimate spiritual solution to the enigmas that presented themselves to these sages. Naturally it is impossible to say which of these enigmas were more advanced in nature when they came to the sages. Further, if it be accepted that the Vedas are the revelations received in the transcendental state of a pure mind, then it would be wrong to conclude that there can be any evolution in it. It would be more like concluding that the words of Sri Ramakrishna are later than the words of a novice of the twenty-first century, simply because Sri Ramakrishna's words are spiritually more perfect. So, one must accept the Vedas as they are.

Every student of religion and every devout Hindu has to go back to the Vedas if he wants to make his life blessed.

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